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ABSTRACT

This report presents an evaluation of the Advanced Courses Development Programme (ACDP) that was set up to rationalize the provision of advanced courses in Scottish further education colleges and central institutions. The ACDP is based on students achieving a certain level of competence in a vocational subject defined in terms of outcome and performance criteria and involving student and course assessments. Discussed are background information, course development and validation, the course structure, and the benefits and drawbacks of the system. Also examined are local and nationally developed courses, and the structure and delivery of the program. The ACDP represents an extensive revision of higher education provision in Scotland, with responsibilities largely devoted to the colleges. The report notes that the phased nature of the implementation has created problems and that guidelines have had to be modified as problems have been encountered and resolved. The report identifies some of these difficulties being faced by staff in colleges as well as the efforts and achievements in addressing them. (GLR)

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No 12

Evaluation of the Advanced Courses Development Programme

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Evaluation of the Advanced Courses Development Programme

Harry Black, John Hall and Sue Martin

The Scottish Council for Research in Education

The last few years have seen unprecedented changes in HNC and HND courses in Scottish colleges. Responsibility for providing advanced courses has been devolved to the colleges themselves, and with this has come a new freedom of innovation in delivery and course structure which has brought about many welcome changes as well as some new challenges. The Advanced Courses Development Programme (ACDP) was set up to rationalise the provision of advanced courses in Scottish further education colleges and central institutions. The system of qualifications introduced by SCOTVEC is based on Higher National units, which can be taken separately or grouped together into 'group awards' which retain the titles HNC and HND. In 1990 the Scottish Office Education Department (SOED) asked the Scottish Council for Research in Education to conduct an evaluation of the development programme in further education colleges and central institutions.

The Advanced Courses Development Programme was intended to contribute to a rational system of course provision in further and higher education.

What are the ideal characteristics of courses at advanced level?

Background to the development programme

A number of new developments in the 1980s meant that changes were needed in the provision of advanced courses: government policy was giving new emphasis to vocational education and training throughout the UK; SCOTVEC had been set up from two bodies, SCOTEC and SCOTBEC, which had differing traditions; and the introduction of the National Certificate had brought about changes in non-advanced further education.

The Higher National units introduced under SCOTVEC's Advanced Courses Development Programme (ACDP) were based on students achieving a certain level of competence in a vocational subject. The basic elements of the system were that:

- 'competence' would be defined in terms of outcomes and performance criteria;
- students would be internally assessed by college staff; and
- courses would be externally assessed to maintain an element of national quality assurance.

The specifications and course frameworks for Higher National units were developed by individual colleges, by consortia of colleges working together, or nationally by SCOTVEC.

Locally developed pilot courses were introduced in two phases in 1988 and 1989, and full implementation of the system began in 1990, with courses to be phased in in three 'batches', ending in 1992.

The research project

The findings are based on case studies of 28 Higher National courses, in six colleges in the academic session 1990–91. These included pilot courses and batch 1 courses (that is, courses from the first year of full implementation), in both further education colleges and central institutions. Thirty-three in-depth interviews were conducted with course leaders and senior staff, and 77 teaching staff completed questionnaires. Data were also obtained from 195 subject specialists who were asked to comment on the specifications for a sample of Higher National units.

Course development

College staff found it difficult to keep up with the pace of development.

How can course developers be given a stable base upon which to build?

Pace of development

The study showed that the development of the new Higher National courses has been extremely rapid and diverse. The pilot courses were designed to be trials of the new system and, as such, it was inevitable that changes would occur in official policy as development progressed. Nevertheless a common complaint from staff concerned the rapid pace of change which occasionally led to some confusion about which set of guidelines they should be following in writing the specifications for the units and the course documents required for validation. Staff clearly wanted a period of stability to allow them to become familiar with the new courses.

Support for staff

SCOTVEC had provided support for the ACDP in the form of nationally developed unit specifications and course frameworks, staff development materials and seminars for appropriate staff, but the impact on staff in the colleges was variable. Education authorities and the colleges themselves had provided some support by allocating time for development work, but this was felt to have been constrained by resource limitations.

Staff welcomed authoritative guidance from SCOTVEC officers and practical support from their colleagues.

What do you think would be the best model for providing staff development?

The support which staff valued most highly took two forms. The first of these was authoritative guidance from those who were seen to have direct access to the current views of SCOTVEC. This usually took the form of discussion with National Development Officers or external course assessors who were felt to have an insight into official policy. The second source of support cited was

that provided by colleagues who were working on the same, or similar, problems. This was usually obtained in an informal manner, but the opportunity to share the practical problems of unit and course development was nevertheless highly valued by the staff concerned.

> *'In casual conversation someone would say "I've had an attempt at doing this" — "Well fax it across to us and let us have a look" and that sort of thing.'*

It must be questioned whether current methods of staff development and support sufficiently capitalise on the support which staff can offer one another. It would certainly seem that, to the staff concerned, 'cascade' models of dissemination have little impact.

Validation

The scrutiny provided by validation was welcomed by many who took part.

Is peer group validation the best model to follow?

Staff were, on the whole, positive about their experiences of validation of courses and the picture which emerged was in some ways heartening. Those staff in further education colleges with no previous experience of validation appeared to have adapted to it well, after some initial trepidation, and there seemed to be no difference between their responses and those of other staff with greater experience of validation. The sense of scrutiny, of having one's work thoroughly examined and approved, was welcomed by many of those who had taken part.

> *'.. if a team from outside comes and puts you through the microscope, then I think it is quite a good thing ... I quite enjoyed the validation process ... it depends very much on the composition of the validation committee.'*

Those whose experiences with validation were less happy often attributed this to 'the composition of the validation committee'. Examples were given where apparent personality clashes had caused problems, and where individuals had been unsure of their role on the validation panel and had become confrontational, or had indulged in what was seen as excessive nit-picking. Other procedural problems had occurred with some pilot courses which were aiming for some form of dual validation — perhaps having to meet the requirements of SCOTVEC and some other accrediting body such as CNAA, a university or a professional body. The requirements of these different bodies did not always mesh easily together.

The validation problems which arose may be no more than teething troubles

How can the problems encountered be avoided or alleviated?

However, such problems, whether of personalities or procedures, tended to be confined to individual cases and can be seen as the teething troubles of a relatively new system. SCOTVEC is continuing to negotiate with other accrediting agencies so that procedural problems should diminish with time. Similarly, as the members of validation panels members gain experience 'confrontational' approaches will probably become rarer.

Course structure

Basic philosophy

Staff accepted the benefits of a competence-based system, but questioned whether it was suitable for all academic levels, and wondered what place knowledge had within it.

How would you ensure that knowledge and understanding are given their due place?

Higher National units are built around achieving a level of competence which is defined by outcomes and performance criteria. Insofar as this focuses on the ability to apply skills in relevant ways, the competence-based system was generally supported.

> *'I believe in competence-based learning ... I am certainly convinced that we should be producing people who have skills to apply rather than knowledge they can talk about ...'*

However, there were also doubts and problems mentioned. The first of these concerned the definition of competence which, to some respondents, seemed to be a fluid concept.

> *'... at the moment the definition is so fluid that we think we're doing what people want us to do and then we go along and somebody else has a totally different idea of what competence is and it becomes frustrating to say the very least'.*

Some respondents were also doubtful about defining 'higher level' skills in competence terms; they felt that the emphasis on practicality and 'doing things' tended to devalue the knowledge and understanding elements.

Respondents wanted more clarity in Higher National unit specifications.

How can competences and levels of attainment be made clearer? Is this only a matter of clearer language?

Specifications for courses

A majority of the respondents were satisfied that the outcomes in the unit specifications studied in this project were clearly stated. However, in all subject areas, a few staff found them either vague, too broadly defined or ambiguous (see table below). A majority of staff also felt that the performance criteria did not clearly define the level of attainment required to achieve the outcomes.

Respondents' views on how clearly competences and skills and levels of attainment were defined

	% of respondents answering:			
	Very clear ←			→ *Not at all clear*
Are the competences and skills specified in the learning outcomes defined clearly and unambiguously? (n=195)	20	40	24	16
Is the level of attainment specified by the performance criteria for each of the learning outcomes defined clearly and unambiguously? (n=186)	18	30	21	31

There were some differences between subject areas, with specifications in Engineering and Accounting judged to be better than in such areas as Communication or Management. Those staff interviewed in depth also wanted the specifications to be more clearly defined. Some of these respondents further claimed that nationally developed specifications tended to be better written than local ones but that the local specifications had improved as experience had been gained. Respondents repeatedly referred to the language used in the unit specifications as jargon.

Assessment

Benefits of the system

The assessment system had recognised benefits but there was a desire for some improvements.

How can staff capitalise on the benefits of assessment and reduce its perceived drawbacks?

The new Higher National courses have marked a move away from traditional end-examinations towards continuous, college-based assessment. The staff agreed that this brought certain benefits:

- assessment was more closely focused on what the students can do;
- all relevant aspects of the course have now to be assessed;
- there was a wider range of assessment methods available; and
- staff now have a greater degree of 'ownership' of their assessment.

All these were welcomed. Paradoxically, a majority of teaching staff (54% of the 56 respondents) felt that the assessment system had deteriorated, compared with 30% who thought it had improved and 9% who thought it had not changed (7% were unsure).

Drawbacks of the system

The drawbacks to the system identified by staff included:

- worries that continuous assessment did not sufficiently test retention of knowledge;
- the danger of 'compartmentalising' knowledge into too discrete components;
- the difficulty of ensuring comparability of standards between centres; and
- the increase in workload which has resulted from both the greater amount of assessment required, and the greater responsibility upon staff to prepare and mark it.

Merit awards posed both philosophical and operational difficulties.

What place should merit awards have and how can they be best implemented?

Some staff also worried that the assessment system encouraged a 'minimum competence' approach, and failed to encourage students to strive for excellence. This is despite the provision within Higher National units for awarding passes with merit. Many staff found merit awards difficult to accept as they felt that these were philosophically incompatible with a competence-based approach. Many others had further problems with the definition of 'merit', finding it difficult to interpret the criteria for merit performance or,

when writing units, to state the criteria in a clear and unambiguous way. In practice many staff appeared to be basing merit awards on comparisons between students, but were not always happy that they had to resort to this 'norm-referenced' strategy. There were also worries about the comparability of merit awards between centres.

There is a need for greater development of 'grassroots' quality assurance.

How can all staff be involved in quality assurance?

All of this places a greater emphasis on the need for systems of quality assurance in which the staff concerned can have confidence. All of the colleges in the study had internal systems of quality assurance in place but, surprisingly, there was a small number of staff (16%), most of them unpromoted, who claimed not to know about them. It would seem that in some cases the structure of course committees and assessment boards has little impact on the day-to-day work of classroom lecturers. Yet it is at the classroom level that reassurance is most required.

External course assessors

At the national level, quality assurance for Higher National units includes three safeguards:

- proper definition of outcomes and performance criteria;
- scrutiny provided by the validation process; and
- verification of the assessments.

Some staff were not confident about national quality assurance.

How can staff confidence be raised?

The first two have been commented on already. The third safeguard is provided by SCOTVEC's external course assessors. While staff in the colleges found the external course assessors to be individually helpful and reassuring, some staff were doubtful about the adequacy of the system. They felt that course assessors had been given a large task to perform, and some respondents questioned whether there was enough communication between course assessors to ensure comparability of standards across the country.

Local and national developments

Locally developed courses

The staff to whom the researchers spoke saw distinctly different benefits and drawbacks in courses developed locally and nationally. The strengths of local development were felt to be that it encouraged innovation and critical thinking about the provision of advanced courses; that it could be designed to meet specific needs; that it promoted a sense of ownership and pride in the courses; and that locally devised units tended to be easier for staff to understand because they had been involved in writing them. Against this, they were thought to be difficult and time-consuming to develop; and some staff worried that they would not have the same 'national currency' as nationally developed unit specifications and course frameworks.

National and local developments presented different strengths and weaknesses.

Which model of development is best for your circumstances?

Nationally developed courses

In contrast, it was felt that nationally developed courses would have this national currency and thus, perhaps, be more widely acceptable. There was also less development work for the staff concerned. The drawback was that the nationally developed courses did not encourage the same critical thinking, nor did they promote the same sense of ownership. Those who supported devolution of responsibility to the colleges also expressed worries about the dangers of 'centralisation'. However, as courses evolve, it may be that many courses using nationally devised Higher National unit specifications will come to have locally developed options built into them. This would build on the flexibility of the Higher National framework and might combine the advantages of both types of development.

Structure and delivery of the programme

Flexibility of provision

One of the purposes of the ACDP was to improve the 'articulation' of courses — that is, to design courses at different levels in such a way that there is an easy and natural progression from one level to the next. The survey showed that this is already succeeding in its aim of making provision more flexible. The Higher National courses and units have a similar structure to that of National Certificate modules and, to that extent, were felt to articulate better with them than did the previous HNC and HND courses. However, staff still felt there were much greater demands made of students on Higher National courses. Staff tended to say that they would judge potential entrants on their individual merits and not simply on their possession or otherwise of National Certificate modules.

While the ACDP created more opportunities for articulation between courses, there was still felt to be a gap between National Certificate and Higher National courses.

What would you consider to be the most rational structure of courses at different levels?

Within central institutions the ACDP had provided much greater opportunities for articulation between HNCs, HNDs and degree courses. Some bureaucratic and administrative problems had been encountered in pilot courses, but these should reduce as experience is gained. The provision of multiple entry and exit points for students was thought to be a definite benefit, and had the additional advantage of encouraging greater access to higher education for those who might not initially be prepared to commit themselves to a degree course.

There was also evidence of collaboration between further education colleges and central institutions, with Higher National courses designed to feed into degree courses. Staff thought that this brought benefits to both sets of institutions.

Teaching methods

The change to the new Higher National courses had also provided an opportunity to re-think teaching methods and look for the most

ACDP had brought opportunities to re-think teaching, but further staff development was required.

Are the most appropriate teaching methods being used?

appropriate way of meeting the needs of the students and involving them more fully in the learning process. Of 54 respondents, 44% thought that teaching methods had improved since the introduction of Higher National units, 20% that they had deteriorated, and 28% saw no change (11% were not sure).

Staff welcomed the changes in teaching methods but some criticised the implied assumption that student-centred methods must be used all the time.

Some respondents were unclear about what student-centred methods entailed, equating them, in some cases, with increased use of tutorials. Staff pointed out that student-centred methods are more time consuming than traditional teaching methods and that there is a need for further staff training in this area.

Discussion

The Advanced Courses Development Programme represents an extensive revision of higher education provision in Scotland, with responsibilities very largely devolved to the colleges. This, plus the phased nature of the implementation, has created its own problems. Guidelines have had to be modified as problems have been encountered and resolved. At the same time wider policy initiatives have had an influence on the direction of the development.

This report has identified some of the difficulties being faced by staff in colleges, in the belief that these will be surmounted through discussion. It is also important, however, to emphasise the successes of the programme in giving colleges freedom to innovate, encouraging changes in teaching methods, and promoting a move towards a rational articulation of courses. Not all problems have yet been resolved, but it is very much to the credit of the college staff and all others concerned that so much has been achieved.

Full report of the project

Units and Competences: A Case Study of SCOTVEC's Advanced Courses Development Programme (SCRE Research Report No 40). Harry Black, John Hall and Sue Martin. SCRE: Edinburgh (1992).

The full report of the project is obtainable from the Scottish Council for Research in Education, 15 St John Street, Edinburgh EH8 8JR, price £6.00.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Scottish Office Education Department who funded the study.

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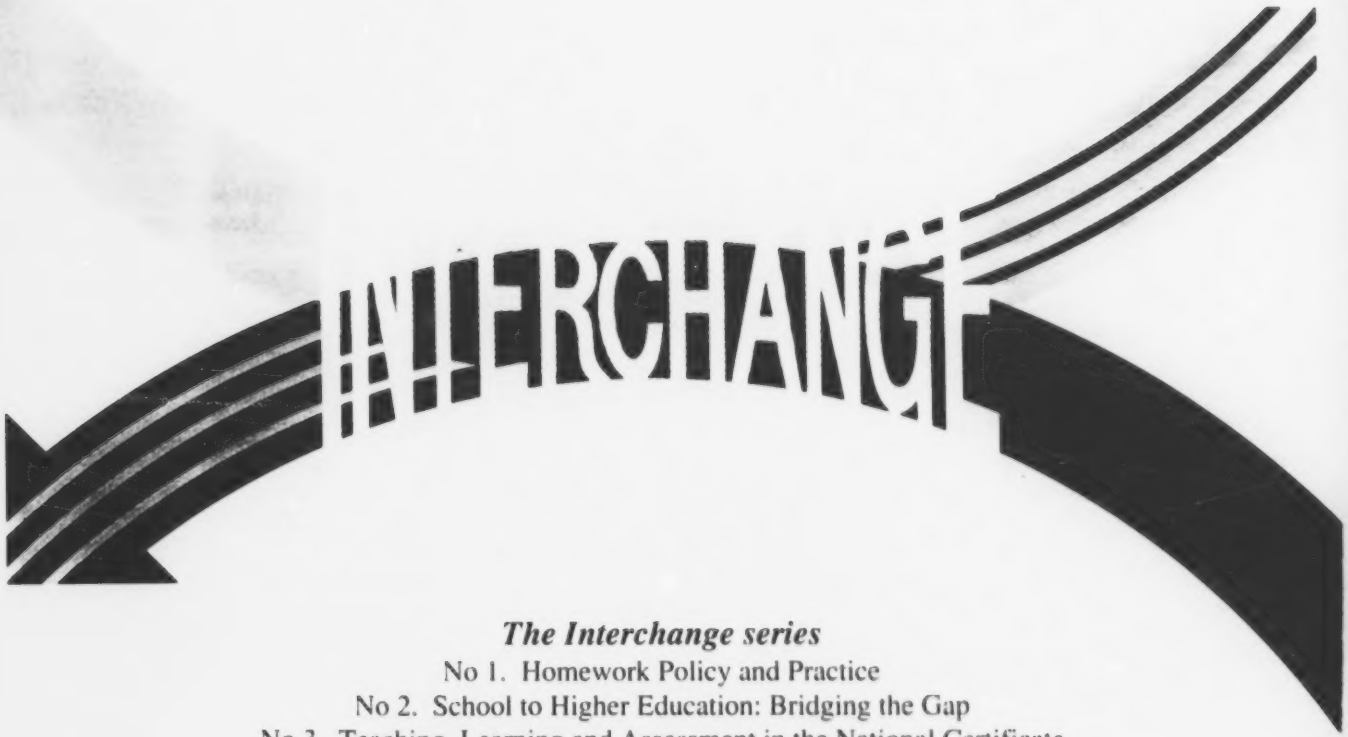

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